

## Leadership and Employee Development

Charles de Gaulle, the French general and statesman, emphasized the value of a military leader when he said: “Men are of no importance. What counts is who commands.” Things are very different in today’s organizations. Virtually every leader now has to acknowledge that employees are actually of the utmost importance in the organization’s pursuit of its goals. Many of the best leaders understand that when employees are engaged, productivity, performance and customer satisfaction all improve because employees become more motivated to contribute to the organization’s success and more willing to put in extra effort to accomplish tasks that are central to the corporate goals.

Our research shows that leaders themselves have a significant impact on whether or not employees will be engaged. Much of this comes down to behavior. If you are a leader and you want to improve the level of engagement in your organization, then you should:

- Try to provide interesting and exciting work. Employees need to feel pride in what is being accomplished and share in the excitement when goals are achieved. The more they feel they are in control of their work, the more likely they are to demonstrate a high level of engagement.
- Show respect and recognize employees for their contributions. Employee recognition is a critical component of achieving higher levels of engagement. People like to be appreciated, acknowledged and respected. They also like to know that their opinions are valued.
- Be visible to employees and “walk the talk.” How you “show up” to work is extremely important. Communicate clearly and let them know what is expected of them. Make sure your nonverbal communication is transparent.
- Encourage upward communication. Create opportunities for dialogue with lower-level managers and employees. Their ideas and input will be well worth the effort invested.
- Tell the truth about the current state of affairs. Great leaders inspire trust by being truthful. Creating a culture of candor—even when it is not easy – is important. Have integrity in what you say and do.
- Inspire confidence in the future of the organization. Doing “more with less” is a reality in many organizations. If you have experienced cutbacks or downsizing, you will have to motivate the remaining employees to perform at their best. Try to limit uncertainty.
- Nurturing a motivated workforce in challenging economic times is not easy. When the going gets tough, employees become anxious and fearful for their future. Here, they will take their cue from the organization’s leaders. How you communicate and whether your actions align with your words will send a strong signal to employees. By understanding what fundamentally drives employee engagement, virtually every leader can begin to shape and reinforce their practices and behavior. This is a fundamental step in creating a high-achieving workforce.

### Perceptions of leadership effectiveness

Employees will subconsciously ask five questions of leaders – the answers to which will determine whether they see that leader as effective:

- Can this person clearly communicate where the organization is headed?
- Can they handle the organization's challenges?
- Are they committed to delivering high-quality products and services?
- Do they believe that employees are important to the organization's success?
- Do I have confidence in their overall capabilities?

These questions are important because our research shows that employees who perceive their leaders as effective have an engagement level that is three-to-five times higher than those who feel their leaders are ineffective. To be seen as an effective leader, you should:

- Demonstrate a sense of urgency. Respond quickly to operational challenges and competitive threats and stay abreast of trends that are driving or disrupting change.
- Be committed to things that matter in the organization. Recognize the value of providing a high quality service. Support employee development initiatives and involve employees in decisions that affect them. If you are committed to being the best, you will inspire employees to achieve the same goal.
- Be trustworthy, show integrity and communicate truthfully. Regular two-way communication is essential. Remember, actions speak louder than words.
- Be conscious of the need to appeal to a diverse set of stakeholders. Show a real interest in employees, customers, suppliers and business partners – not just the financial stakeholders of the business.
- Tell others what you expect from them. When employees understand how they are expected to focus their time and energy, they are more likely to achieve the desired results.
- Having a strong monitoring and feedback mechanism to measure results is also important to help employees understand where they need to make adjustments.

Employee engagement is a means to an end. That is, organizations that want to drive high levels of business success need motivated and engaged employees to get there. To instill higher levels of engagement, leaders need to be very aware of the impact of their own behavior.

The real question for leaders is how much competitive advantage can you gain by improving employee engagement in your organization? When your employees are engaged, they will not just perform, they will go the extra mile for you. The pay-off of increasing their morale and productivity is not just reduced absenteeism. Get it right and you will see improvements in employee retention, service quality, customer satisfaction and, crucially, in the bottom line financial performance of your organization.

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